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ABSTRACT

In light of recent calls by educational organizations to abolish tracking because of its role in perpetuating inequities in achievement among racial and ethnic groups, this digest looks at current school detracking efforts. An initial section reviews the extent and reasons for tracking and the concerns raised when detracking is proposed, noting that some studies indicate that high achieving students do well in tracked situations because they benefit from the enriched environment, not because of the homogeneity of the group. A central section summarizes the following changes necessary for a successful detracking effort: (1) a culture of detracking and a commitment to being inclusive; (2) parent involvement, particularly among middle-class parents who can be detracking's most vigorous opponents; (3) professional development and support for teachers as detracking depends on teachers being actively involved in the change; (4) phase-in change process over time and with flexibility; (5) a willingness to rethink all routines; and (6) district and state support. Also covered are models for instruction in heterogeneous classes, the need for alternative assessment in a detracked school, and mention of the Accelerated Schools model. (Included are nine references.) (JB)

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SUCCESSFUL DETRACKING IN MIDDLE AND SENIOR HIGH SCHOOLS

In tracked schools, students are categorized according to measures of intelligence, achievement, or aptitude, and are then assigned to hierarchical ability- or interest-grouped classes. Although most elementary schools have within-class ability grouping, tracking is most common at the middle and high school levels.

Recently, a wide range of national educational and child advocacy organizations have recommended the abolition of tracking. Their reason is that too often tracking creates class and race-linked differences in access to learning. In fact, because of the inequities in opportunity it creates, tracking is a major contributor to the continuing gaps in achievement between disadvantaged and affluent students and between minorities and whites (Oakes, 1992; 1985).

Although tracking has declined nationwide in recent years, it remains widespread. For example, in grade seven about two-thirds of all schools have ability grouping in some or all subjects, and about a fifth group homogeneously in every subject. Moreover, the prevalence of ability grouping increases when there are sizable enrollments of black and Hispanic students (Braddock, 1990).

Not surprisingly, the changeover to heterogeneous groupings—generally called either detracking or untracking—remains controversial. The greatest concern among both parents and educators is that heterogeneous grouping may slow down the learning of high-achieving students, for there is evidence that high achievers do better in accelerated classes for the gifted and talented (Kulick, 1991). Oakes (1992), however, has pointed out that the benefits these students experience are not from the homogeneity of the group, but from their enriched curriculum—which lower track students would also thrive on, given sufficient support.

It is also clear that tracking can work against high achievers, particularly where a large number of the students are above average. Districts vary enormously in their cut-offs for slow and gifted learners. In fact, suburban, middle-class districts, where students perform above the national average, generally have high cut-offs for their gifted and talented programs, and are therefore most likely to send many capable students to regular or unaccelerated classes (Useem, 1990).

Current Detracking Efforts

There is still much to understand about the ramifications of both tracking and heterogeneous groupings. Yet because the country is quickly shifting toward a belief in heterogeneous groupings, and many schools have already begun detracking some or all academic subjects, it is useful to summarize those changes necessary for detracking to succeed.

Based on the ethnographic study of schools around the country, Wheelock (1992) outlines six factors which exist in schools that are successfully detracking.

1. A Culture of Detracking. Creating a new culture of detracking is probably more important than any specific strategy. Perhaps the key to a detracked culture is the commitment to be inclusive. Teachers, parents, and students alike believe in the right and ability of students from every background to learn from the best kind of curriculum. They are also convinced that *all* students can gain academically and socially from learning together and from each other.

2. Parent Involvement. Since middle-class parents of gifted students can be detracking's most powerful opponents, they must be assured that their children will not be subjected to a watered-down curriculum, but that *all* students will be offered "gifted" material. They must also be helped to rethink the competitive, individualistic way in which they have come to view schooling, and to see how learning improves when students listen to others from different backgrounds, share knowledge, and teach their peers.

3. Professional Development and Support. Because the core of any detracking reform centers on how teaching will occur in the classroom, it is critical that teachers be actively involved in the change. This means not only that discussions about when, where, and how to detrack must include teachers, but that teachers must receive professional development prior to, during, and after the detracking process.

Wheelock suggests that teachers must receive three major areas of training for detracking:

- the risk-taking, communication, and planning skills to work for whole-school change;
- strategies for working effectively with diverse students in a single classroom; and
- specific curricula they may not have used or watched others use.

4. Phase-In Change Process. Detracking involves large changes at many levels. Even once the commitment to detracking has been made, most schools proceed slowly to allow teachers, students, and parents to adjust. Often detracking begins with a single grade level, student cluster, or subject—say, science, social studies, or language arts. Mathematics, with its aura of appropriateness for only the best and the brightest, often remains the last to be breached by detracking plans. The point is not that there is a certain way to proceed with detracking, or even a definite time schedule. Rather, plans must be flexible enough to respond to hesita-

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tions and concrete problems as well as unanticipated openings.

5. Rethinking All Routines. Ultimately, detracking should be reflected in all areas of school life. Thus, school routines that separate students from each other, that exclude some students from the opportunity to learn, that communicate reduced expectations for some, or that undermine a sense of belonging must all be rethought. Instead of pull-out approaches, every attempt should be made to keep *all* students within the regular classrooms, providing the fast learners with needed stimulation and the slow ones with the necessary support.

6. District and State Support. Although detracking takes place at the school level, a supportive policy coupled with technical assistance at the district and state levels can nurture administrators and teachers, enabling more than the most adventurous schools to proceed.

Instruction for Heterogeneous Classes

In a fully detracked school, most instruction is provided in heterogeneous groups. Teachers no longer pace their instruction to the "average" student, but individualize learning through personalized assignments and learning centers. Rather than dominate the classroom, teachers act as directors of learning which takes place through such multiple routines as cooperative learning, complex instruction, and peer and cross-age tutoring.

Developed by Robert Slavin and his associates at Johns Hopkins University, cooperative learning has been heavily researched; it is the most common strategy used in detracked schools and exists in a number of models. In all, students work in heterogeneous groups and share responsibility for one another's learning. While some models insert a competitive element, others stress the building of team scores by mutual cooperation (Slavin, 1990).

The Need for Alternative Assessment

Standardized testing has been the handmaiden of tracking, assuring teachers, students, and administrators alike that there is a rationale behind the hierarchical sorting of students. Although standardized tests will likely continue to be used for some purposes, they tend to work against a detracked culture. First, they see ability as static, not as dynamic, and they suggest what students already know, not where they need help. Second, they create an emphasis on teacher talk, seat work, and rote learning—all of which are antithetical to the interactive, problem-solving and egalitarian workings of a detracked school.

While a variety of performance-based tests are being developed, so far they are expensive, labor intensive, and imprecise (Maeroff, 1991). Thus their growth will be dependent on a commitment not only to new ways of teaching and a problem-solving curriculum, but to egalitarian school organizational structures.

Accelerated Schools

One school restructuring model that results in detracking is *Accelerated Schools*, developed by Henry Levin and his colleagues at Stanford. Briefly, in an accelerated school, all students receive the enriched curriculum and problem-solving techniques generally reserved for gifted and talented students. As in any successfully detracked school, an accelerated school curriculum is not only fast-paced and engaging, but it includes concepts, analyses, problem-solving and interesting applications. Dewey's notion of "collaborative inquiry" both informs how learning occurs in accelerated schools, and guides the school governance process. Again, as with detracked schools that depend for their success on bringing parents, teachers, and students into the process, accelerated schools involve parents, teachers, and students in formulating both the goals and the interventions (Levin, 1987).

Conclusion

Although tracking remains controversial among both educators and parents, there has been a recent policy consensus that the negative effects of tracking on lower track students are so severe that schools should move towards detracking.

Successful detracking rests on an "inclusive" school culture. It also depends on a curriculum that is interactive and problem-solving, as well as on assessment processes that support such a curriculum. Schools embarked on detracking must draw in parents, students, and teachers, not only to ensure that these groups buy into the change, but to teach them new egalitarian ways of thinking, and to use them to help reconsider existing school routines.

— Carol Ascher

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